

Indicators of Teaching for Understanding

by Jay McTighe and Elliot Seif

What does "teaching for understanding" look like? What would we expect to see in an Understanding by Design classroom? The following list of observable indicators includes items developed by Grant Wiggins, Jay McTighe, and Elliott Seif, as well as items suggested by participants in an October 23 workshop on Teaching for Understanding offered by Jay McTighe and Elliott Seif at the 2000 ASCD Teaching and Learning Conference in Tampa, Fla.

Feel free to use or adapt the list as needed to guide classroom observation, coaching or mentoring, peer visitation, self-assessment, and professional development.

The unit or course design

- Reflects a coherent design—big ideas and essential questions clearly guide the design of, and are aligned with, assessments and teaching and learning activities.
- Makes clear distinctions between big ideas and essential questions, and the knowledge and skills necessary for learning the ideas and answering the questions.
- Uses multiple forms of assessment to let students demonstrate their understanding in various ways.
- Incorporates instruction and assessment that reflects the six facets of understanding—the design provides opportunities for students to explain, interpret, apply, shift perspective, empathize, and self-assess.
- Anchors assessment of understanding with authentic performance tasks calling for students to demonstrate their understanding and apply knowledge and skills.
- Uses clear criteria and performance standards for teacher, peer, and self-evaluations of student products and performances.
- Enables students to revisit and rethink important ideas to deepen their understanding.
- Incorporates a variety of resources. The textbook is only one resource among many (rather than serving as the syllabus).

The teacher

- Informs students of the big ideas and essential questions, performance requirements, and evaluative criteria at the beginning of the unit or course.
- Hooks and holds students' interest while they examine and explore big ideas and essential questions.
- Uses a variety of strategies to promote deeper understanding of subject matter.
- Facilitates students' active construction of meaning (rather than simply telling).
- Promotes opportunities for students to "unpack their thinking"—to explain,

interpret, apply, shift perspective, empathize, or self-assess (incorporates the six facets of understanding).

- Uses questioning, probing, and feedback to stimulate student reflection and rethinking.
- Teaches basic knowledge and skills in the context of big ideas and explores essential questions.
- Uses information from ongoing assessments as feedback to adjust instruction.
- Uses information from ongoing assessments to check for student understanding and misconceptions along the way.
- Uses a variety of resources (beyond the textbook) to promote understanding.

The learners

- Can describe the goals (big ideas and essential questions) and performance requirements of the unit or course.
- Can explain what they are doing and why (i.e., how today's work relates to the larger unit or course goals).
- Are hooked at the beginning and remain engaged throughout the unit or course.
- Can describe the criteria by which their work will be evaluated.
- Are engaged in activities that help them to learn the big ideas and answer the essential questions.
- Are engaged in activities that promote explanation, interpretation, application, perspective taking, empathy, and self-assessment (the six facets).
- Demonstrate that they are learning the background knowledge and skills that support the big ideas and essential questions.

Have opportunities to generate relevant questions.

- Are able to explain and justify their work and their answers.
- Are involved in self- or peer-assessment based on established criteria and performance standards.
- Use the criteria or rubrics to guide and revise their work.
- Set relevant goals based on feedback.

In the classroom environment

- The big ideas and essential questions are central to the work of the students, the classroom activity, and the norms and culture of the classroom.
- There are high expectations and incentives for all students to come to understand the big ideas and answer the essential questions.
- All students and their ideas are treated with dignity and respect.
- Big ideas, essential questions, and criteria or scoring rubrics are posted.
- Samples or models of student work are made visible.
- Exploration of big ideas and essential questions is differentiated, so some students are able to delve more deeply into the subject matter than others.